

Shawn Phillips

Shawn Phillips is one of most fascinating and enigmatic musicians to come out of the early-'70s singer/songwriter boom. The mere fact that he is a virtuoso musician as much as a singer and songwriter allowed him to stand out and attract a dedicated following. His refusal to pigeonhole his music -- which seamlessly melds folk, rock, jazz, funk, progressive, pop, electro, classical, and global folk traditions -- to meet anyone else's expectations allowed him to retain his cult following without ever achieving the stardom that his talent seemed to merit. Though Phillips began recording for Columbia in the mid-'60s (and worked on [Donovan](#)'s records from the period), it was his virtually unclassifiable run of ten '70s LPs for A&M -- including [Contribution](#), [Second Contribution](#), [Faces](#), [Bright White](#), and [Spaced](#) -- that established his reputation for boundless, nearly peerless creativity and virtuosity. Phillips was a musical shapeshifter. His work as a virtuoso 12-string guitarist combined with his four-octave vocal range fascinated and confounded some critics, but resonated with listeners. Phillips has always been able to get exactly what he needed from virtually any instrument he played and from his recordings and on-stage collaborators. After relocating to Italy and lying low during most of the '80s and '90s -- he toured, wrote, and worked with musicians outside his native United States before transplanting to post-Apartheid South Africa, he resumed recording in earnest during the middle of the 21st century's first decade, sounding as if he had never left.

Phillips was born in 1943 in Fort Worth, Texas, the son of best-selling spy novelist Philip Atlee, who moved the family around the world at various times, including to the South Pacific. After hearing "Malaguena" on the piano, he took up the guitar at age seven, and by the time he was 12, he was playing the chords to [Carl Perkins](#) songs. Phillips' musical experience transcended rock & roll, however. In the course of his family's travels, he got to live in almost every corner of the globe, including Tahiti, and absorbed the music that surrounded him wherever he was living. He returned to Texas in his teens, with some training in classical music but a love for performers like [Jimmy Reed](#) and [Ike & Tina Turner](#), among other blues and R&B artists. He did a hitch in the Navy, and then went back to Texas before retreating to California, where he played around the early-'60s folk circuit.

Phillips made his first record, an over-produced single of [Bob Gibson](#)'s version of "Frankie and Johnnie," for Columbia, which he followed with two albums, [I'm a Loner](#) and [Shawn](#), neither of which was successful. Phillips went to England, where he performed and wrote songs with [Donovan](#), in a professional relationship somewhat clouded in controversy. (Phillips claimed in interviews during the '70s that he co-wrote "Season of the Witch," as well as a major portion of the songs that finally surfaced on the album [Sunshine Superman](#), but only ever received one co-author credit for "Little Tin Soldier" on the [Fairytale](#) album.) While staying in England, the range of his work vastly expanded, partly with the help of various controlled substances.

He was ejected from England for playing without a work permit and tried living in Paris before he headed for Italy. He settled in Positano, a tiny fishing village. By the late '60s, Phillips' musical expertise had broadened to include not only different kinds of guitars, but also the Indian sitar. After a few years of trying, he recognized that he'd started too late and would never master the sitar in the traditional manner, and instead began learning to make his own music on the instrument.

In 1968, he went to London with the idea for a trilogy of albums and recorded a major portion of it in collaboration with [Traffic](#) members [Steve Winwood](#), [Chris Wood](#), and [Jim Capaldi](#). No record company was willing to commit to such an ambitious body of work by an unknown artist, and the material languished for more than two years until Phillips came to A&M Records. Producer [Jonathon Weston](#) listened to his work and decided to try and release an edited version of the music.

This became his A&M debut album [Contribution](#), which ranged freely between uptempo folk-rock ("Man Hole Covered Wagon") to introspective quasi-classical guitar pieces ("L Ballade") and works mixing sitar and acoustic guitar ("Withered Roses"). The album got positive reviews, but it was when Phillips embarked on his first U.S. tour, in conjunction with his next album, [Second Contribution](#), late in 1971, that he was discovered by the press. Critics in the New York Times and other publications displayed unbridled awe at Phillips' prowess on a range of instruments, including electric and acoustic six- and 12-string guitars and the sitar, and his singing range, a full three octaves from baritone to counter-tenor, as well as his songwriting. He was one of the few singer/songwriters to play double-necked six- and 12-string guitars (a standard feature of progressive and metal bands) on-stage, in intimate locales such as New York's Bottom Line, and to test the full range of the hybrid instrument.

Writers lavished praise on Phillips for his unusual lyrics, haunting melodies, daunting musicianship, and the ambition of his records. He was a complete enigma, American-born but raised internationally, with a foreigner's keen appreciation for all the music of his homeland and a seasoned traveler's love of world music, with none of the usual limits on his thinking about music. He slid between jazz, folk, pop, and classical sounds -- it was nothing for Phillips to segue from a progressive-style mood song with a 50-piece orchestra into an R&B-based number driven by his electric guitar, and back again. "The Ballad of Casey Deiss," from [Second Contribution](#), was a case in point, a song about a friend who died when he was struck by lightning, scored for acoustic guitars, electric guitars, vibraphone, and the horn section of a full orchestra, as well as multi-layered vocals.

A third album, [Collaboration](#), followed, along with another tour, and then came [Faces](#), [Bright White](#), and [Furthermore](#). His collaborator was conductor/arranger [Paul Buckmaster](#), the man responsible for the choral accompaniment on [the Rolling Stones'](#) "You Can't Always Get What You Want" and several other rock-meets-classical touchstones including Elton John's first four albums. On tour, Phillips was booked into clubs with artists such as comedian [Albert Brooks](#), singer/songwriter [Wendy Waldman](#), and [Seals & Crofts](#), and usually worked solo, surrounded by a half-dozen guitars, or sometimes with a single accompanist, [Peter Robinson](#), on keyboards.

Phillips never achieved major stardom, despite his critical accolades. He never courted an obvious commercial sound, preferring to write songs that, as he put it, "make you feel different from the way you felt before you started listening," primarily love songs and sonic landscapes. But his experiments with electronic keyboards on his albums from the mid- and late '70s made him a jazz-funk pioneer as well -- though that, like many of his musical innovations, wasn't generally recognized until somewhat later.

He made nine albums for A&M before moving on to RCA in 1978 for [Transcendence](#), which mixed his guitars with a 60-piece symphony orchestra and members of [Herbie Hancock's](#) band, produced in collaboration with arranger/conductor [Michael Kamen](#). He also contributed to movie music by [Manos Hadjidakis](#) and appeared in the movie *Run with the Wind*. In 1983, he recorded [Beyond Here Be Dragons](#), an ambitious set with producer [Michael Hoenig](#), bassist [Alphonso Johnson](#), guitarist [Caleb Quaye](#), keyboardist [J. Peter Robinson](#), and [Ralph Humphrey](#) on drums. It remained unreleased for five years. Chameleon issued it in 1988 to the delight of fans.

With close to 20 albums behind him since the mid-'60s, Phillips has a following in America, Europe, and Japan, and he has performed at different world music festivals. A cult figure whose peers include [Van Dyke Parks](#) and, perhaps, [Leonard Cohen](#) (though [Cohen's](#) public profile was enhanced by his following as an established poet and author in the literary community), he remains an enigmatic figure on the music landscape. His work remained sufficiently in demand in the '90s, however, to justify a best-of compilation from A&M in 1992 that included notes by Phillips and one new song. In 1995, Polygram South Africa issued the anthology [Another Contribution](#).

Phillips had become a fireman and emergency medical technician in Texas. In 1994 a brand-new studio date, [The Truth If It Kills](#), produced by [Michel Le Francois](#) was issued by Imagine in Canada. In 1998, Wounded Bird re-released eight new classic albums from his catalog.

Phillips, who'd moved to South Africa in 2000 and worked as a paramedic with the National Sea Rescue Institute, claimed in interview that he was pretty much out of music completely between 1994 and 2003. Nonetheless, [No Category](#) was issued by Universal that year. It compiled new and unreleased music alongside previously issued songs. A boxed set from Gott Discs paired [Contribution](#) and [Second Contribution](#) in 2004, and his catalog titles slowly began reappearing from various labels. On June 6, 2006 [the Nashville Symphony Orchestra](#) performed the suite *Disturbing Horizons: Events in the Life of a Prince* comprised of nine Phillips' pieces.

The two-disc [Living Contribution: Live at Kirstenbosch Gardens](#) was released by South Africa's Feet Music in 2007. In 2009, Hux released the long-sought-after [Live at the BBC](#) from a 1973 appearance, and in 2011, 1972's [Faces](#) saw re-release. In 2013, [Rumplestiltskin's Resolve](#) (originally issued in 1976) appeared from Talking Elephant, and a year later Varese Sarabande released [Infinity](#), a set of unreleased material from 1989. The 20-track double-disc [Perspective](#), contains songs written and recorded since the 2000s (mostly in South Africa). It was issued in 2015 by Talking Elephant and was followed by a 2016 reissue of 1978's [Transcendence](#).